



Library Services for Immigrants

A Report on Current Practices

Office of Citizenship

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INTRODUCTION

Public libraries in the United States have a long history of providing resources and education to immigrants. This tradition may be traced to Andrew Carnegie's support for public libraries as a place for immigrant self-education, enlightenment, and the study of democracy and English. This role is especially relevant today as the immigrant population in the United States has grown to a record 33.5 million people, representing 12 percent of the U.S. population. New immigrants are settling outside of traditional gateway cities where there are fewer resources to facilitate integration, such as English language instruction or citizenship preparation courses. Thus, there is an even greater role for public libraries in welcoming and educating immigrants.

This report identifies current practices in library services for immigrants and offers ideas for libraries that wish to provide programs and services for immigrants living in their communities. The report, which provides sample suggestions and strategies, is not a comprehensive guide, as there are likely many other promising approaches for assisting immigrants in libraries nationwide. The report addresses the following topics:

- Partnerships
- Collections
- Information Services
- Programs and Events
- Outreach
- Planning

The practices and recommendations in this report are the result of a working group convened in October 2004 by the Office of Citizenship, which is part of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Department of Homeland Security. The Office of Citizenship's mission is to promote instruction and training on citizenship rights and responsibilities and to foster the civic integration of immigrants. The working group included representatives from public libraries across the country, immigrant community-based organizations, and adult educators who work with English language learners. (Participating organizations are listed in the appendix.) Over the course of a day and a half, the group discussed many issues related to helping immigrants integrate into U.S. society, with a special focus on the roles public libraries can play. Their ideas are reflected in this report.

PARTNERSHIPS

In many communities with large or new immigrant populations, public libraries and organizations that serve immigrants often face a demand for services that exceeds their resources. Working group participants identified partnerships between libraries and immigrant-serving organizations as a strategy for bridging the resource gap. Partnerships help to leverage resources, provide avenues for sharing information and referrals, and can provide technical assistance to a library's program.

The staff of The American Place, an immigration program at the Hartford Public Library in Connecticut, took advantage of the proximity of their library to government offices and developed a close working relationship with the local USCIS Hartford Sub-Office. Library staff regularly participates in the community meetings hosted by the Hartford Sub-Office to provide input on local immigration matters.

Partnering organizations can distribute library outreach materials, present library information at their events, provide speakers for events at the library, advise on effective ways to reach target audiences, and refer their immigrant clients to the library. These organizations may be willing to underwrite some of the costs of outreach efforts, for example, by paying to print flyers or a newsletter for the immigrant community. Successful partnerships are those in which all members agree on their purpose and goals and cooperate to meet the needs of the community's immigrant residents. The working group cautioned that partnerships must be compatible with the library's mission.

The Boulder Public Library in Colorado collaborated with the University of Colorado at Boulder to present "Communities of Exile," a day-long event held at the library that featured presentations by individuals, music, poetry reading, and performances.

A first step toward building partnerships is involving the local immigrant community in the life of the library. Libraries should solicit their advice on programs and services and invite immigrants and representatives from community organizations and local agencies to serve on advisory councils or working groups.

The following organizations were suggested by working group members as likely partners:

- Government agencies for public assistance, employment, health care, legal advice, education, and immigration
- Community-based organizations, especially those who focus on immigrants
- Organizations that work with specific immigrant groups
- Adult education providers and English language instructional programs
- Local universities and community colleges
- Faith-based organizations
- Local public school systems
- Social services agencies
- Refugee and resettlement organizations
- Local business associations and service clubs

The King County Public Library in Washington State joined forces with a local literacy organization, a church, and the USCIS Seattle District Office to develop a pilot program called “Centered on Citizenship.” The program’s goal is to involve teen tutors in preparing adult and elderly citizenship applicants for the naturalization process. Tutoring includes question-and-answer practice for the naturalization exam as well as English language dictation practice. In addition, applicants get training and practice in techniques to help them handle the stress that may arise during their naturalization interview.

Working group members advised that businesses, both local enterprises and local branches of large corporations, may also make good partners, especially those businesses that provide services to immigrants, such as banks. Many of these institutions may have developed materials for immigrants in their native language or at a lower level of English and may provide copies to libraries to distribute. Other resources that partners can provide include:

- Access to community information—demographics, needs assessments, surveys, etc.
- Translation assistance
- Teachers for English as a Second Language (ESL) or citizenship classes
- Speakers for programs
- Donated materials and equipment
- Transportation assistance
- Childcare
- Legal advice
- Tutors and storytellers
- Assistance with grant applications
- Financial support

The Queens Borough Public Library in New York has a partnership with the Queens Health Network, the largest health care provider in the area. They work together to plan monthly “coping skills” workshops addressing the health needs of immigrants and featuring speakers from two local public hospitals.

COLLECTIONS

Working group participants recommended that libraries wanting to expand their holdings for a new immigrant group should first determine the group’s interests and needs. One approach would be to form a subcommittee within the collection development committee to help select materials for immigrant patrons. The subcommittee might consist of representatives from the various units of the library, representatives of immigrant-serving agencies, and, of course, immigrants themselves. In addition to developing collections, this group can enable the library to build important connections in the community. Other ways to solicit advice about building a collection for immigrants include:

- Consulting with other libraries serving substantial numbers of immigrants
- Holding focus groups with immigrants
- Consulting with community agencies that serve immigrants
- Conducting an immigrant needs assessment as part of a general community needs assessment

Suggestions for collections might include:

- English language instructional materials
- Citizenship and immigration resources
- Tutor resource materials
- Dictionaries in multiple languages
- Novels translated into other languages
- “How-to” books in multiple languages
- Periodicals and newspapers in different languages
- Information on various ethnic groups and cultures
- Original source materials
- Music and video resources
- Forms, brochures, and directories for community services

Working group participants noted that it is crucial to take into account immigrants’ wide range of English language skills when selecting materials. If members of the library staff are unfamiliar with procedures for determining the reading level of materials, a local ESL provider may be able to help. Purchasing a reputable, reasonably priced readability software program may also be a resource.

Participants also suggested collecting native language materials selectively. Criteria for acquisition of these materials may include the estimated number of speakers of a specific language within a community, usefulness to library patrons, and relevance to particular programs offered by the library or other community organizations.

INFORMATION SERVICES

All of the libraries participating in the working group reported having a user-friendly web page listing their resources for immigrants. Some libraries involved representatives of the immigrant community in the process of designing the page. Immigrant community members can provide guidance about the usefulness of the information, ease of navigation, and elements that will make a web page attractive to their peers. The group recommended asking other agencies that serve immigrants to link their page to the library's menu of immigrant services. Translating the library's web page into the most common languages spoken among local immigrants is another strategy for making the library more accessible to immigrants.

Because library staff members are familiar with the community, they are often in a good position to refer immigrants to other local agencies or organizations. Many communities have developed free, comprehensive community services guides. This is often the library staff's most useful resource for making referrals. Participants recommended contacting local organizations that work with immigrants to see if translations are available that could be added to a library's collection.

Several libraries developed their own community services guide when they learned that the community did not have one. The guide can be as simple as a three-ring binder or as advanced as an interactive web page. The process involves deciding what information is most useful in making referrals and then surveying local organizations to get this information. It is important to note if community organizations have bilingual staff. Some libraries set a goal of reviewing and updating this guide at least twice yearly.

The Queens Borough Public Library has print and online copies of the Queens Directory of Immigrant-Serving Agencies. Published every two years, the Directory lists almost 200 agencies providing services in more than 50 languages. The library also offers "Bienvenidos a Queens," a Spanish language web directory of community resources.

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Family and intergenerational programs enable libraries to attract patrons of all ages. Participants noted that they try to attract immigrant families by offering various types of afterschool and evening programs. Other libraries work with local schools to design programs to meet specific needs, such as a workshop on English grammar for students or a library tour for parents.

The Queens Borough Public Library offers workshops in branch libraries to help immigrants adjust to life in their new country. Programs are presented in the community's main immigrant languages by lawyers, teachers, counselors, and other professionals. Workshop topics have included immigration law, health issues, job search, women's issues, parenting, education, and others.

Bridge programs are intended to help immigrants learn about and integrate into their communities. Well-designed bridge programs create opportunities for immigrants to meet and interact with a variety of community members, while also providing valuable information and skills needed by all. Immigrant parents can make new connections in the community, learn to help their children in school, and improve their own language skills. For elderly immigrants, these programs can reduce their isolation and help connect them to the community. Sample programs might include:

- Community resources seminars
- "American Issues" and civics discussion groups
- Cultural activities and holiday events
- On-site English language and citizenship classes
- Conversation-practice groups
- Free seminars by immigration lawyers
- Book clubs
- Voter education seminars
- Health seminars
- Family literacy programs
- Computer literacy programs

The working group also offered ideas and suggestions for participating in program events located outside of the library itself in order to attract immigrants to the libraries. Some of these ideas include:

- Participating in community events that reach out to immigrants
- Attending adult and continuing education forums to learn about new services and programs
- Visiting with staff at refugee centers and other social services agencies and getting on their mailing lists

The ESL Center at the Jones Library in Massachusetts recruits, trains, and supervises volunteer tutors who work one-on-one with adult immigrants. The Center also provides citizenship application packets in envelopes addressed to USCIS. The ESL Coordinator answers questions about the naturalization process and offers practice interviews to help learners prepare for their naturalization interview.

OUTREACH

As one working group participant noted, “Once you have found the immigrants living in your community, winning their trust is the next hurdle.” Some immigrants may be wary of public institutions because of personal experiences in their home countries or a lack of knowledge about government services in the United States. It is important to have a plan to let the community at large, and immigrant communities in particular, know about library services. It is worthwhile to take the time to create a clear outreach message and make sure all library staff members know and understand this message.

The Outreach Librarian at the Boulder Public Library considers outreach to be inextricably linked to partnerships. Her first step as an Outreach Librarian was to attend meetings held by community groups and other organizations. In collaboration with other agencies, the library was able to initiate an Immigration and U.S. Citizenship Advocacy Group consisting of representatives of local government agencies, schools, adult education and literacy programs, and other organizations.

Participants recommended identifying a target audience as specifically as possible, taking into consideration where immigrants live and work, and then listing possible methods of communication into existing library-wide marketing plans.

The Queens Borough Public Library distributes “Help!” booklets and bookmarks to assist immigrant library patrons. Available in English and 12 other languages, the “Help!” materials feature basic library terminology.

The following are strategies for helping immigrant patrons feel welcome and valued in the library:

- Recruit immigrants to serve on the library board.
- Hold library tours for immigrant groups and host public lectures on issues of interest to immigrant communities.

- Hold a series of round table discussions on immigrant issues at the library.
- Create an agency book club with peers from other community agencies to learn more about the immigrants in the community.
- Participate in local public events to publicize the library’s services for immigrants, including visiting adult ESL programs and local employers who hire immigrants to let them know about library resources.
- Print a brief brochure or flyer—in English and in the native languages of a local community’s immigrants—that describes the library’s programs and services. Ask partners to distribute these throughout the community.
- Develop public service announcements (PSAs) for local radio stations.

“Library Links!,” the multilingual outreach program of the Minneapolis Public Library in Minnesota, has six Bilingual Outreach Liaisons, regular library staff members who develop partnerships, attend community events, make regular contact with other organizations to inform them about library programs and events, and help introduce immigrants to the library. Bilingual Outreach Liaisons also work regular shifts at the library so that patrons will know when bilingual assistance is available and they also translate all appropriate library-produced literature and provide training workshops for teachers who work with immigrants.

PLANNING

All working group participants emphasized that planning is crucial to creating thoughtful, well-organized programs and services for immigrant patrons. The planning process should be the same process used for other programs and services the library offers. If the library staff is not experienced in planning programs and services, a colleague from another public library may be able to assist. If a library is just beginning to serve immigrants, taking some small, thoughtful steps toward attracting and assisting immigrants is more likely to succeed than creating an elaborate plan that may prove difficult to implement.

The working group suggested the following steps in developing a plan and managing services to immigrants:

- Identify and involve stakeholders and the target population.

Stakeholders are all those in the community with a vested interest in the success of the library’s programs, including the immigrant groups the library serves and other community organizations, such as literacy councils, schools, or local government.

- Develop a statement of purpose.

A written statement of purpose that is based on and supports the mission of the library is a good first step. Library staff, stakeholders, and community members should develop a clear, concise statement of purpose that reflects the needs of the community.

- Define the scope of programs and services.

Establish a scope of services that is manageable and identify partners to fill in gaps or supply needed expertise. Include plans for an evaluation early in the planning process, rather than waiting until programs are fully implemented. Seek outside assistance with this process if staff members do not have the expertise.

The ESL Center at the Jones Library tracks many indicators of their program's effectiveness, including the number of students who become naturalized citizens, enter college or training, become employed, or receive their GED diploma; the number of ESL books and audiovisual materials circulated; and the number of people receiving citizenship information packets and assistance, among others. The library also maintains a bulletin board featuring patrons who have recently become citizens.

- Include immigrant services in the budget.

Explore how other libraries have budgeted support services for immigrants and determine whether the library's budget might accommodate similar "set asides." Identify other possible funding sources during the budget planning process. Consider applying for grants to support new and innovative programs and services. "New and innovative" may simply mean new to your community or service area. Make sure immigrant services are included in a separate line item or existing budget categories.

"Library Links!" at the Minneapolis Public Library was created in 1999 through the Carnegie Gateway Project of the Carnegie Corporation. When Carnegie's support ended in 2001, "Library Links!" had become "a key element in how the Minneapolis Public Library served the community," and the program was added to the library's operating budget.

- Review organizational structure and staffing.

Decide how staff will be deployed, who will administer the services, and who will work with partners. Consider the general skills that staff will need such as techniques to

use when working with a population with limited English skills. One working group participant recommended offering internships to immigrants with skills that might help the program or involving library board members and community partners in helping to identify qualified individuals.

With a \$500 grant from the Friends of the Austin Public Library in Texas, the library created kits to help train volunteers who lead "Talk Time," informal conversation practice sessions for English language learners who visit the library.

- Analyze the physical environment.

As one working group participant stated, "It's a waste of time and energy getting immigrants into the library if the physical environment is not conducive to their needs." Make sure the library's physical space is welcoming and easy to navigate for immigrant patrons who may be unfamiliar with how a public library functions. Choose the format and language for all signs carefully to ensure that they are clear to all patrons. Check to see if additional signs are needed to direct immigrants to resources aimed at them.

The Austin Public Library has five New Immigrants Centers that provide information, study and audiovisual materials, computer access, and software designed for independent, self-paced learning by immigrants. There is no dedicated staff for the Centers; the library's Committee on Adult Literacy and Immigrant Issues serves as the coordinating body for the Centers, with the five branch library managers, reference staff, and other interested staff members participating.

CONCLUSION

The ideas and suggestions presented in this report are the result of a working group of librarians, adult educators, and community-based organizations that met in October 2004 to discuss current practices and strategies for immigrant services in public libraries. As public libraries continue to play an important role in welcoming immigrants into their communities, these suggestions for partnerships, collections, information services, programs, events, and outreach should prove useful to the thousands of libraries located in American communities. The Office of Citizenship, within USCIS, convened this working group in support of its mission to facilitate the civic integration of immigrants.

Appendix

WORKING GROUP PARTICIPANTS

American Library Association, Chicago, IL
Austin Public Library, Austin, TX
Bosnian-Herzegovinian Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
Boulder Public Library, Boulder, CO
Chicago Public Library, Chicago, IL
Chinese Mutual Aid Association, Chicago, IL
College of Du Page, Gelen Ellyn, IL
Hartford Public Library, Hartford, CT
Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, Chicago, IL
Jones Library, Amherst, MA
League of United Latin American Citizens, Chicago, IL
Minneapolis Public Libraries, Minneapolis, MN
National Institute for Literacy, Washington, DC
Queens Borough Public Library, Queens, NY
Seattle King County Library System, Seattle, WA
Township High School District 214, Arlington Heights, IL
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Chicago, IL and Washington, DC

Websites of libraries participating in the working group

Austin Public Library	http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/library/i_about.htm
Boulder Public Library	http://www.boulder.lib.co.us/special/multicultural/
Chicago Public Library	http://chipublib.org/
Hartford Public Library	http://www.hplct.org/tap/TAP.htm
Jones Library	http://www.joneslibrary.org/esl/index.html
King County Library System (WA)	http://www.kcls.org/lit/esl.cfm
Minneapolis Public Library	http://www.mplib.org/librarylinks.asp
Queens Borough Public Library	http://www.queenslibrary.org/programs/nap/index.asp